"Creating community" as a teaching strategy for honors students

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1. About 'Creating community'

Students who are able and motivated to do more than the regular curriculum offers, the honors students, call for a specific didactic approach by the teachers (Wolfensberger, 2012). In search of this specific pedagogy, Wolfensberger formulated the three pillars of Honors Pedagogy. These pillars are creating a community, enhancing academic competence, and offering freedom. This note concentrates on the pillar of 'creating a community,' concerning teaching strategies "that create rapport and connectedness between teachers and students and among students; and that create a learning community" (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 22).

Cross (1998) defines learning communities as groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning. In an honors community, faculty, students, and professionals have close contact and form a network in which interaction among them is fostered as is learning by doing and co-creation (Van Ginkel et al., 2014; Fuiks & Clark, 2002; Stobbe & Hogenstijn, 2017). Research shows that honors communities vary between educational programs in size, structure, level of activity, and interaction (Van Ginkel et al., 2014). However, several key factors can be found; these factors include, for example, frequent formal as well as informal meetings, a shared passion for challenge and excellence, a feeling of belonging, shared ownership, and a culture of excellence. A core group of active members, a physical location, and a safe environment can also promote the development of an honors community (Van Ginkel et al., 2014).

2. Importance of 'Creating community' in honors education

By working and learning in an honors community, students have the opportunity to discuss and interact with peers who are just as motivated and intellectually interested as they are themselves (Kaczvinsky, 2007). The students' academic experience can be enriched through this interaction (Rutland Gillison, 2002) and results in discussions being stimulated

(Robinson, 1997). Students and teachers indicate that these interactions especially make honors activities valuable, and they are experienced as being essential to the honors program (Coppoolse, Van Eijl, & Pilot, 2013).

Furthermore, participation in learning communities results in better academic performance in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, and integration of academic and social experiences (Zhao & Kuh, 2004; Van Lankveld & Volman, 2011). Also, social adjustment to university life can be eased by participating in a learning community as is students' engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004) and well-being (Van Eijl et al., 2013). Participating in an honors community can also have a positive influence on talent development (Van Eijl et al., 2013; Sosniak, 2006).

3. Teaching behaviors that contribute to 'Creating community'
Teachers seem to play a crucial role in facilitating the development of an honors community (Sherin, Mendez & Louis, 2004). The research of Wolfensberger (2012, p. 148-149) resulted in three clusters of teaching strategies that can foster the creating of a community:
- Strategies for building an effective relationship between teachers and honors students and among honors students
- Strategies and forms of teacher behavior that create a positive and supportive spirit
- Strategies and forms of teacher behavior that make the teacher part of the community in a practical and a personal sense

An example of a strategy for building an effective relationship between teachers and honors students is the appreciation of students' questions and remarks. This strategy has to do with trusting the students and giving them the confirmation that they are doing well, something Dutch honors teachers mentioned as being important for students (Kingma et al., 2017). Also, talking with students and giving them feedback as if they are equal to and as important as the teacher is a way to show appreciation for what students say and do (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 26). Letting students finish their remark or question, answering their questions seriously, complimenting them when appropriate, and listening actively to them will show appreciation for what they said.

An example of a strategy that creates a positive and supportive spirit is inspiration. Inspiration energizes and gives direction to behavior. Exposure to high-achieving role models of whom the successes are relevant and attainable led people to adopt more positive self-conceptions and inspired them to set higher aspirations (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). When teachers are seen by students as role models, they are able to boost the aspirations of their students and influence the students' professional identity formation (Apker & Eggly, 2004). Figures of authority who exhibit wisdom and promote positive values of civic engagement are people honors students are inspired by (Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 32). A positive attitude, compassion, integrity, subject-related enthusiasm, and the ability to teach are important qualities of teachers to inspire students (Wright et al., 1998). Students can also get inspired and be engaged by opportunities to co-create their own honors education with teachers (and management).

A strategy to make the teacher part of the community in a practical and a personal sense is to create a supportive, friendly atmosphere in which students learn from each other

(Wolfensberger, 2012, p. 148). Working towards such an atmosphere in the honors class starts with taking the time to get to know each other, for example, by starting with a special introduction meeting or a camp (Van Eijl et al., 2013; Kingma et al., 2017) or by organizing fieldtrips later on. Van Eijl et al. (2013) advise to promote the creation of a community by having students work together in small groups, matching students based on their willingness to work together, facilitating initiatives of students - which is comparable to giving room for students' personal interests – and stimulating the use of social media. Being available and easily accessible for students is linked with creating the atmosphere of community as is demonstrating commitment to the honors community. Besides, Whitlock and DuCette (1989) indicate that enthusiasm, empathy, and openness are all qualities needed to create community. These are qualities that help to improve the atmosphere and create a supportive and friendly environment in which students learn.

4. Community outside class

Although teachers are pivotal for creating community in class, an honors community is not created in class alone. It is important to give honors students opportunities to manifest themselves outside of class, for instance, through institutional committees, honors students boards, and service learning projects. Adopting a project as a group, so that honors students can share their talents to move the world, is also a way to create community. Honors groups can choose to endorse a project, for example, in refugee camps and collect money or do voluntary work. Furthermore, shared goals within their university enables students to create community, for example through projects that transfer honors to regular education to partner with freshmen or facilitate workshops.

Apart from honors teachers and students, a supportive management and university board is also essential to create an honors community. Having an honors director or honors dean as well as a specific physical honors location / rooms are listed among the basic characteristics of a well-functioning honors program the NCHC developed (NCHC, 2010).

5. Final remarks

Most of the research concerning honors teaching is based on empirical data collected in Anglo-Saxon educational cultures, which is certainly a limitation.

Wolfensberger (2012) offers an honors signature pedagogy with three main components, namely: creating a committed community, enhancing academic competence, and offering bounded freedom. It is clear that those three are interwoven and interconnected. It is also clear that both teachers and students play an important role.

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